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PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLH RUEHLN RUEHLZ

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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0129

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3287

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1102

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0973

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1542

RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2140

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0683

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 000118

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV SCUL SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN RETURNS TO A MORE NORMAL HOLIDAY SCHEDULE

**¶11.** (U) According to standard practice, Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedov on January 18 signed legislation listing this year's annual holiday schedule. However, included this year among the usual events -- New Year's Day, Day of Remembrance (of the victims of the 1948 earthquake) and the Kurban Bayram (Eid) holiday -- were some notable changes. Contrary to the practice in recent years, the president decided to reinstitute International Women's Day (March 8) as an official non-working national holiday (Niyazov had banned it as "Russian"). Memorial Day, a two-day non-working holiday under former President Niyazov (the second day involved a commemoration of Niyazov's father's death), has been decreased to a more normal (in the CIS) one-day commemoration of the victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II). December 21, the day of Niyazov's death, which in 2007 was commemorated as a non-working holiday because it coincided with the Kurban Bayram holiday, will be a normal workday holiday in 2008. Ruhnama Day (September 12), however, will remain a workday holiday this year. Flag Day (February 19) -- which coincidentally fell on Niyazov's birthday and which he stretched to a two-day extravaganza of self-glorification -- remains on February 19.

**¶12.** (U) COMMENT: People are noticing these small, subtle changes, which they interpret as a deliberate but gradual effort by President Berdimuhamedov to weaken the former president's cult of personality. Most welcome these changes as a return to the "normal" holiday schedule they were used to celebrating in the latter years of Soviet rule and the first years of Niyazov's administration. The next logical step would be to eliminate Ruhnama Day and to change the names of the months back to their traditional names (Niyazov named January "Turkmenbashy" in honor of himself and called April "Gurbansoltan," his mother's name. With so many other changes in the works, several of our contacts have speculated that the president has sent a bill for Parliament approval that would allegedly officially return the days of the month to their traditional Turkmen names. Such a step would be welcome.

HOAGLAND